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VoiceThread: A Useful Program Evaluation Tool

Abstract

With today's technology, Extension professionals have a variety of tools available for program evaluation. This article describes an innovative platform called VoiceThread that has been used in many classrooms but also is useful for conducting virtual focus group research. I explain how this tool can be used to collect qualitative participant feedback and provide insight on the benefits and challenges of implementing the VoiceThread platform for program evaluation purposes.

Keywords: [VoiceThread](#), [qualitative research](#), [program evaluation](#), [focus group](#)

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Introduction

In today's digital world, Extension professionals are using a wide variety of tools to gather feedback and data from program participants and stakeholders (Rowntree, Wittman, Lindquist, & Raven, 2013). Through online asynchronous discussion boards, chat rooms, and even online live synchronous discussions, the Internet has changed the manner of qualitative data collection forever (Stancanelli, 2010). VoiceThread (<http://voicethread.com>) is a multimedia platform used by primary and secondary school educators around the world as a storytelling and collaborative tool that also offers promise as a tool for qualitative program evaluation. The unique features of VoiceThread provide a rich backdrop for conducting virtual focus group interviews.

How It Works

A focus group interview is a discussion with a small group, usually approximately six to eight people, that centers on a specific topic. Participants are asked to reflect on and respond to questions asked by the interviewer, listen to one another's comments, and make additional responses. The object of a focus group interview is to gather high-quality data in a context in which people can express their own views while considering the views of others (Patton, 1987). A virtual focus group interview conducted using VoiceThread technology can function in much the same way as the traditional face-to-face version.

VoiceThread is a Web 2.0 tool that is cloud based, is hosted through the Internet, and requires no software ("Amazing Conversations," n.d.). Upon entering the VoiceThread platform, users find a basic interface that allows them to upload media from a variety of sites or from a computer. They comment on these images by choosing

their preferred source, which may be a microphone, phone, webcam, keyboard, or audio file ("Amazing Conversations," n.d.). Doodling functions allow users to emphasize certain areas of a project by drawing shapes or other figures ("Amazing Conversations," n.d.).

Steps for Using VoiceThread with a Virtual Focus Group

If you are interested in expanding your qualitative program evaluation options, consider using VoiceThread. The steps and strategies outlined here serve as guidance for conducting a successful VoiceThread focus group interview.

- Load a media image for each question you wish to pose. It is especially meaningful if this image relates to the topic of your focus group interview, such as a photograph taken during the program being evaluated.
- Choose the tool you will use to pose the question: microphone, phone, webcam, keyboard, or audio file.
- Post your question. Continue this process until you have posed all of your focus group questions.
- Invite participants to your VoiceThread focus group by sending them a link or forming a group. Provide invitees with a completion date they must meet should they choose to participate.
- As participants respond to your questions and comment on one another's responses, ask follow-up questions to develop a clearer understanding of the phenomenon of interest. Because VoiceThread is an asynchronous platform, it is important to respond to participants in a timely fashion.
- When the timeline you have established for your virtual focus group interview has passed, export your VoiceThread project to download and save it offline. You are now ready to analyze your data.

Benefits

VoiceThread helps practitioners and participants be responsible with time and financial resources and allows participants to respond in ways that are most comfortable for them. Some specific advantages of a VoiceThread focus group interview over the face-to-face option are as follows:

- VoiceThread is asynchronous, allowing participants to respond at their convenience.
- The online format allows time for participants to carefully think about what they want to say.
- VoiceThread eliminates the issue of one participant's dominating the conversation.
- Participants choose how they wish to respond—via microphone, phone, webcam, keyboard, or audio file.
- Participants can respond numerous times, commenting on other participants' perspectives and answering questions posed by the interviewer.
- Online technology eliminates issues of distance and travel costs.

Considerations

Carefully think through the project you want to evaluate before deciding to use VoiceThread for a virtual focus group interview. In making your decision, answer the following questions:

- *Is VoiceThread appropriate for your audience?* Consider your participants' demographics and whether using technology makes sense. Virtual technology is not the right fit for every group of participants. If your audience does not have reliable Internet access, is not comfortable using technology, or is used to only face-to-face interaction, VoiceThread probably is not the right tool for the job.
- *What size would the focus group be?* The optimum size for a face-to-face focus group interview is six to eight participants (Patton, 1987), and this number also works well for a VoiceThread focus group. A group this size is small enough for participants to interact, yet large enough for diverse viewpoints and perspectives to come through in discussion.
- *How many questions should you ask?* Ask enough questions to gain understanding, but do not overwhelm your participants. You may find that you receive richer, more thoughtful responses by asking fewer questions. You can always drill deeper, posing follow-up questions to specific participants if you desire.
- *Are you willing to invest the time in learning how to use the technology?* Although the platform is user friendly, there is a learning curve, especially if you wish to create complex projects. However, participants typically find responding to VoiceThread projects easy.

Conclusion

Technological advances will continue to provide those of us who work in Extension with new tools for obtaining qualitative responses useful for program evaluation purposes. Careful consideration of the benefits and challenges of these tools is key as we expand and adapt our evaluation processes to obtain rich, deep responses that help us capture experiences or understand the needs of those we serve. Adding VoiceThread to your existing toolbox of qualitative program evaluation techniques is worth consideration.

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